



Institute on Religion and Public Policy Report:

Religious Freedom in the Federative Republic of Brazil

Executive Summary

Brazil's Constitution provides for religious freedom at all levels; however, lack of government infrastructure and internal corruption allows for societal abuses of religious freedom and other human rights. The severity of these abuses varies by region, with areas such as Rio de Janeiro experiencing an alarming degree of corruption and organized violence. However, in November, Brazil was included for the first time in a list of countries with a high human development index, according to the UN Development Programme's Human Development report, due to the implementation of the family grant, a redistributive program initiated by the federal government contributing to sizable reductions in extreme poverty. This classification suggests that the overall situation may be improving.

Institute on Religion and Public Policy

The Institute on Religion and Public Policy is an international, inter-religious non-profit organization dedicated to ensuring freedom of religion as the foundation for security, stability, and democracy. The Institute works globally to promote fundamental rights and religious freedom in particular, with government policy-makers, religious leaders, business executives, academics, non-governmental organizations and others. Twice nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, the Institute encourages and assists in the effective and cooperative advancement of religious freedom throughout the world.

History of Religious Freedom and Politics in Brazil

Brazil was initially established as a colony of Portugal, becoming an independent constitutional monarchy after gaining independence in 1822 and later establishing itself as a republic after a military coup in 1889. The country has been nominally a federal republic ever since, except for three periods of overt dictatorship (1930–1934; 1937–1945 and 1964–1985). The first two “mild” dictatorial periods occurred under the leader Getúlio Vargas, who came to power through a coup in 1930. Vargas successfully diversified the country's economy by forcing the development of basic industries and implementing agricultural reforms to lessen the country's dependence on coffee. While his dictatorial ruling style aroused opposition, he centralized the government, beginning the *Estado Novo*—new state—and reflected a new consciousness of nationality. In 1945, the army forced Vargas to resign, and the country was again a federal republic for two decades, a period marked by inflation and political infighting. In 1965, Brazil

again became a dictatorship, with the rule of Gen. Emílio Garrastazú Médici, commencing in 1969, leading to a descent into state-sponsored terrorism. During this time, the military police responded to guerrilla attacks with widespread torture and the nation saw the formation of death squads aimed at eradicating dissidents. This violence abated somewhat in the mid-1970s.

By 1974, Brazil had become the world's largest debtor. However, in 1979 under Gen. João Baptista de Oliveira Figueiredo, Brazil experienced tremendous industrial development and increasing movement toward democracy. Despite these improvements, economic and social problems continued and the military maintained control of the government. A civilian government was restored in 1985 under José Sarney, and illiterate citizens were given the right to vote. Since then, the Brazilian government has grappled with economic issues stemming from past years of inflation and corrupt rule. Current President Lula da Silva's political campaigns and tenures in office have been riddled with scandals and alleged bribes, causing the resignation or termination of at least seven high-ranking government officials since 2003. Although da Silva has escaped implications in the scandals, they have considerably sidetracked his ambitions of social reform.

The US State Department cites the 2000 census conducted by the Geographic and Statistical Institute of Brazil (IBGE) as a measurement of Brazil's religious demography, indicating that approximately 74% of the population identify themselves as Roman Catholic, approximately 15% of the population is Protestant, an estimated 85% of whom are Pentecostal or evangelical, and nearly all other major religious groups are represented within the country. Historically, Brazil has boasted even higher percentages of Catholics; the diversification of religious adherents is a relatively recent phenomenon. In absolute numbers, Brazil has more Pentecostals than anywhere else in Latin America. Over 10% of the population identified itself as Pentecostal in Brazil's 2000 census, doubling the figures from a decade earlier. According to a 2006, 10-country survey of Pentecostals by the Pew Research Center, a non-partisan think tank in Washington, nearly 21% of urban residents surveyed identified themselves as Protestant, the majority Pentecostal. The Pentecostal movement has gained traction in even the most violent areas of the country. For example, in Rio de Janeiro, which registers 6,000 murders a year and police and military are distrusted at best, Pentecostal churches are on the rise. In such areas, Pentecostals are among the few who are fearlessly standing up to organized crime.

Brazil is home to a variety of syncretic religious groups and the followers of various African religions. Such examples include Candomblé and Umbanda, with around 127,582 and 397,431 Brazilian followers, respectively. The religions came from Africa to Brazil, carried by African priests and adherents who were brought to the country as slaves between 1549 and 1888. Over time, Candomblé

and Umbanda combined with elements of other Brazilian religions, especially Catholicism, as Brazilians often exhibit a syncretic view of religion.

Legal Status

The Brazilian Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and this general grant of religious liberty is supported by other laws and policies. Brazilian law is designed to protect an individual's rights against abuse by the government or private individuals. As a practical matter, the government generally respects religious freedom, but there are a few reports of societal abuse and discrimination that are not always well managed by the government.

Education is mandatory in Brazil, and public schools are required to offer religious instruction, but the students retain the option to attend religious instruction. Furthermore, parents have the right to decide whether to send their children to public or private, religious schools. If a parent chooses to send his or her child to a religious, private school the government prohibits that parent from using any public subsidies to fund tuition or any other associated costs.

Brazil maintains a law making it illegal to promote anti-Semitism or racism through written media. This law clearly places a suspect infringement on the right to free speech. It allows the courts to impose a fine or imprisonment if anyone displays, distributes, or broadcasts anti-Semitic or racist material.

In November 2008, the country passed the *Brazilian Charter of Religious Liberty*, a document designed to uphold the provisions of religious freedom outlined in the Constitution and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. According to Dr. Alcides Coimbra, secretary-general of the Brazilian Association of Religious Freedom and Citizenship (ABLIRC) and a member of the Commission charged with drafting the charter, "[the] initiative aims to broaden the debate and identify circumstances that go unnoticed by the majority of the population regarding how intolerance and discrimination on religious motivation materialize, in order to construct ways of overcoming discrimination and to promote respect for human rights—particularly the right to freedom of religion and conscience." Additionally, the charter was open to public input through online venues up until its proclamation, thus aiming to serve as a comprehensive representation of public opinion on issues of religious liberty.

Specific Instances of Religious Discrimination

The laws prohibiting publishing anti-semitic material helps make anti-semitism rare, but Jewish leaders have reported an increase in violence in recent years. Website affiliated with neo-Nazi and skinhead groups are increasingly posting anti-Semitic material; the number of groups and websites is increasing every year. Additionally, Brazilian police report an increase in anti-Semitic graffiti, harassment, vandalism, and threats via telephone and email. For example, the

Rio de Janeiro Jewish Federation (FIERJ) reported an average of six telephone threats per week. However, the number of threatening, anti-Semitic calls they received increased dramatically in February 2008 because a local school created a float for the Carnival festivities that depicted scenes from the Holocaust. FIERJ and the Simon Wiesenthal Center successfully sought a court order preventing the school from showcasing the float and making any future references to Hitler or Nazism in the parade. The school redesigned their float and entitled it "Freedom of Expression."

The Jewish population has also had to deal with unflattering remarks from leaders of the Catholic Church. In April 2009, a Brazilian Archbishop who had previously claimed that Jews distorted the number of adherents killed in the Holocaust again stated that, "More Catholics than Jews died in the Holocaust, but this isn't known because the Jews control the world's media." As a response, the ADL issued a statement noting that April served as the third consecutive month where Catholic clergy made public remarks alluding to Holocaust denial.

Brazilian Jews were not the only group facing intimidation; practitioners of African-based religions were intimidated by evangelicals in Rio de Janeiro. In March 2008, a group of neo-Pentecostal drug traffickers threatened practitioners of Candomblé and Umbanda. Additionally, some of the Candomblé and Umbanda temples were destroyed and the congregation's priests and members were forced to flee to the Baixada Fluminense community.

In March 2009, doctors performed an abortion on a nine-year-old Brazilian girl who had allegedly been raped repeatedly by her stepfather since age six. After complaining of stomach pains, doctors found the girl to be pregnant with twins and determined she would be physically unable to survive the pregnancy. Regardless, the Catholic Church condemned the abortion. After doctors performed the procedure, the Church excommunicated all those involved, including the doctors and the girl's mother. The girl was exempt from excommunication due to her age.

In the state of Para, a small contingent of Catholic bishops with outspoken stances on human rights violations face continuous death threats from bellicose groups in the region. The bishops, who migrated to Brazil as missionaries to combat societal injustices under the ideas of Liberation Theology, continue to speak out against the lawlessness in an area now serving as a primary transit point for Colombian cocaine. With a faltering economy and rising unemployment rate, the drug trade has taken a prominent role in the local economy. The police and major politicians who wield power in the area are simultaneously the most corrupt. In Para, numbers of missionaries are dwindling; those who are willing to confront otherwise unchecked social grievances are diminishing as well.

The state continues to experience corruption stemming from various directions, including local and federal police operations. According to Amnesty

International's 2008 report, despite continued citations of human rights violations by police, President Lula and leading members of his administration publicly supported certain high-profile militarized police operations, especially in Rio de Janeiro. Violence against women continues to plague the country. Cases brought under the 2006 "Maria da Penha" law, which criminalizes domestic violence, began going through the courts in 2007. Although the law was a major advance, lack of resources, difficulties in enforcing exclusion orders and poor support services hampered effective implementation. Violators of human rights enjoyed impunity as a result of failures at every stage of the criminal justice system, except in cases with international ramifications.

United States Foreign Policy

According to the US State Department, "the U.S. Government discusses religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights." The main focus of US foreign policy with Brazil revolves around ongoing topics of discussion such as trade and finance, hemispheric economic integration, and energy policy.

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice visited Brazil in March 2008 and signed a historic Joint Action Plan for Racial Equality. The plan calls for Brazil and the United States to work together in combating racial discrimination and sharing best practices in tackling discrimination in the realms of education, law enforcement, labor, health, and many other areas.

Conclusion

While Brazilians continue to experience varying degrees of persecution based on religious belief, the abuses they incur are mainly isolated instances that do not lend themselves to any form of systematic societal or governmental patterns of oppression. Rather, such instances of discrimination and abuse highlight structural inefficiencies within the Brazilian government and its climate of impunity and internal corruption.